## Prud'homme's Store after the Civil War

After the Civil War, however, as the South's agricultural economy devoted more and more of its resources to cotton, even food staples like flour and meat were being imported from the Midwest and elsewhere. Salt pork was the other great staple, but, after the Civil War, nearly all of it was shipped from New Orleans in barrels, an indication that Prud'homme, like most other Southern planters, was devoting virtually all of his resources to cotton production. This reinforced a growing dependence on outside markets to supply local needs. More and more manufactured goods also poured on to the market, including new products like kerosene, which quickly became necessities.

The advent of wide-spread sharecropping and tenant farming after 1868, however, brought the freed slaves into the market place for the first time and gave rise to plantation stores like the ones at Magnolia and at Oakland, where goods and produce could be bought on credit.

The commissary store evolved into a general store patronized by all races of sharecroppers and tenant farmers as well as by the dwindling number of independent small farmers. Even after Emmanuel Prud'homme built his own store at Atahoe in the 1890s, the Oakland store continued to be a center for community life, especially for residents on the west bank of Cane River. At least until after World War II, when widespread use of automobiles brought increased mobility, the Oakland store remained a focal point for the entire community.13

Throughout the 1870S, most of the plantation supplies and goods for the store were brought in by river boats to a large warehouse that stood between the road and the west bank of Cane River just south of the present bridge at Oakland. Although river boats continued to ply the river until it was dammed in 1908, low water frequently prevented river transport above the Red River rapids at Rapides, necessitating laborious overland transport to points north, including Oakland.

Even before the arrival of the railroad, however, Prud'homme carried a surprising array of goods at his store, including such specialties as sherry, salmon, and oysters. While some of these items were special orders, Prud'homme took full advantage of the flood of material goods that were widely available and, at least for some, affordable in the years after the Civil War. In 1873, the store carried not only staples like salt pork, flour, rice, sugar, coffee, and lard, but also whiskey, tobacco, candy, cheese, crackers, sardines, salt, pepper, and molasses. Prud'homme also carried hardware like tools, hinges, skillets, padlocks, looking glasses, brooms, pocket knives, and fish hooks, as well as a variety of fabrics and other dry goods. "Coal oil;' or kerosene, was also on sale, although in 1873 it was still sold in bottles and five-gallon cans.<sup>26</sup>

After the advent of the railroad through the parish in 1882, the array of goods and produce expanded significantly. A variety of clothes and household goods was available along with some fresh produce, especially apples and oranges, and an expanding array of canned goods, including pineapple, milk, and "potted"

meat." Berkson Brothers, Prud'homme's regular wholesale grocer in New Orleans, was even able to supply him with claret, lobster, and other delicacies that the Prud'hommes as well as some of their tenants enjoyed.<sup>27</sup> Cologne, Castile soap, tooth brushes, iodine, and paregoric were some of the toiletries and medicines sold in the store in the 1880s.<sup>28</sup>

By the 1890s, many store keepers, perhaps including Alphonse Prud'homme, were also showcasing luxury items like cuckoo clocks, chromo lithographs, and stereoscopes. At the same time, manufacturers provided all sorts of product dispensers such as Burpee Seed Company's chromolithographed exhibits that changed with the seasons. Some store owners even set up "five and dime" counters, imitating the merchandising concept pioneered by F.W Woolworth in 1879.29 In addition, bulk goods like eight-pound sacks of Quaker Oats and forty-pound loaves of plug tobacco gradually gave way to packaged products, especially after 1900, as advertising and a "packaging push" began to consolidate a consumer-driven economy. Even the proverbial cracker barrel began to disappear as the National Biscuit Company, organized in 1898, pushed its pre-packaged Uneeda Biscuits in a prototypical campaign of mass marketing and distribution. 30 Still, dried beans, rice, lard, coffee and sugar continued to be sold in bulk at Prud'homme's Store until well into the twentieth century. 31

By the first decade of the twentieth century, Alphonse Prud'homme II recalled that the store had everything from something to eat, to something to work, to something to wear. Those old country stores were really what you'd call department stores. You could go in there and buy groceries...

clothes...implements, tools, and everything else."<sup>32</sup> In addition to cane fishing poles and cotton picking bags, Mayo Prud'homme also remembered the big old pink flannel bloomers that women used to wear and shirts without collars for the celluloid collars. We had the collars in there also and the cuffs, high button-up shoes for women, reading glasses, dyes, bric-a-brac-, you name it.<sup>33</sup> In addition to food stuffs and dry goods, the store carried "Varsol;' a heavy- duty cleaning fluid, as well as kerosene, which was one of life's essentials in the days before rural electrification brought power to the Cane River valley in the late 1930s.

S. F. Bowser of Ft. Wayne, Indiana, produced the first pumps that would dispense precise quantities of oil and kerosene in 1885 and, by 1889, had a thriving factory and a sales force of fourteen. The wood-framed kerosene tank and pump still in the north shed (003) of the store comprise one of these early Bowser- manufactured systems; it probably dates to the 1890s. Motor oil and gasoline were also sold at the store, even before World War I; but, not until the late 1910S were modern gasoline pumps using underground tanks perfected. Around 1920, the Prud'hommes installed one of the early "visible pump" systems (invented in 1918) for gasoline, which remained in service until around 1950 when it was replaced by the present pumps. 34 The store also provided another outlet for local produce, including pecans that Prud'homme would purchase from area residents "on halves" and store until picked up by L. S. Johnson Pecan Company in Natchitoches. In the yard to the north of the Big House, Alphonse Prud'homme even created two small ponds where he raised "shiners" that he sold for fish bait in his store. 1

- Oakland Plantation Prud'homme's Store HSR National Park Service pp. 14-19
- 11. "Contract With Hands, 1868," Series 4, folder 546, Prud'homme Coll., UNC
- 12. Several letters to and from Alphonse Prud'homme after the Civil War indicate that Prud'homme was dependent on shipments of pork to supply his hands; see Series 3.1.1, folder 149.
- 13. Malone, "Oakland Plantation ...," p. 126.
- 28. Camphorated tincture of opium, a popular pain killer.
- 29. Schlereth, Victorian America, p. 143.
- 30. Schlereth, Victorian America, p. 145.
- 31. Interview with Kenneth Prud'homme, 3 April 2001
- 32. Malone, "Oakland Plantation ," p. 126.
- 33. Malone, "Oakland Plantation," p. 156.

  Beginning in 1920, Phanor Prud'homme inventoried the contents of the store around the first of each year; see" Inventory

  Books, 1872-1970, "Series3.2.7, Prud'homme Coll., UNC.
- 32. Malone, "Oakland Plantation," p. 157-158. 160.
- 33. Malone, "Oakland Plantation," p. 157.